

[\(/\)](#)[HOME \(/\)](#) / [RPI \(/RPI\)](#) / [POSTS](#)/ [**LINKING-LEADERSHIP-AND-SERVICE-CREATING-REFLECTIVE-EXPERIENCES-FOR-STUDENTS**](#)

Linking Leadership and Service: Creating Reflective Experiences for Students

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More often than not, students entering our colleges and universities think about service as a requirement. There's even the stereotype of the highway clean up crew picking up litter. Is that service? Sure, it provides a service to the community. But where's the learning in that experience? There should be some level of structured reflection to enhance the experience.

Most of our students have had a certain number of service hours to complete while in high school and they bring that experience and perspective with them to our campuses. That can be a good thing because students have developed habits of volunteering. On the flip side, the service experience tends to become just one more requirement that needs to be checked off the list. Moreover, students who have had some leadership experience and training often approach these experiences with a different level of motivation. As student affairs educators then, we have a significant challenge facing many of us in our work: create spaces for real civic learning and leadership development to happen on campus and in the community.

We know from experiential learning theory that deep learning can take place when students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences in a structured manner. Many university leadership and service-learning program administrators have come to understand their role as critical educators promoting lasting social change. Learning outcomes for these programs aim to impact interpersonal skills, civic identity, social identity awareness, leadership capacity, career leadership skills, spirituality, and much more. Further, when students are provided with safe spaces to reflect on their service and leadership experiences, they often grow in important ways.

Author T.S. Eliot said people can “have the experience but miss the meaning.” Students can accumulate many activities on their resumes, but without structured reflection, they can miss the meaning and significance of those experiences in their lives. Further, they run the risk of not being able to articulate what they have learned and how those experiences have impacted them. We want them to be able to share with professional mentors and future employers the impact of those service and leadership experiences on their lives.

At East Carolina University, we’ve developed reflection plans for nearly all of our leadership and service programming, thus striving to make sure that students emerge with concrete learning. The examples below serve as a type of “case in point” and highlight just a few of the ways we help students make meaning from their involvement:

- **Emerging Leaders:** The Chancellor’s Student Leadership Academy is a 12 week leadership development program for a select group of student participants. The goal of the program is to create a safe space for students to be able to explore leadership concepts and best practices. Students participate in two forms of reflection on a weekly basis. Immediately following each workshop, students complete a critical incident questionnaire to evaluate the workshop experience. The questionnaires focus on students’ immediate impressions, reactions, and reflections to what they’ve heard. Then, within 24 hours of each workshop, students complete a

one-page reflection with a prompt. The goal of the second activity is to reflect on lived experiences, weekly readings, and facilitated discussions; the students have more time to compose their responses as well. In addition, pre- and post-tests are completed by students to evaluate the achievement of student learning outcomes. These tests also serve as a reflective tool.

- **Immersion Programming:** ECU's Alternative Break Experiences (ABE) strive to create active citizens, leaders, and advocates for lasting social change. A variety of reflection strategies are used through the planning and implementation of these ABE programs. We embed reflection as a part of ABE student/staff leadership trainings through both individual and group discussions focused on specific social causes. Student leaders are then asked to conduct pre/post trip meetings with participants which introduces reflection as a tool both before and after the ABE experience. Individual journals are one important reflection tool; these pre-scripted journals included service and leadership prompts for each day of the experience. Student leaders make use of planned reflection time each evening during the immersion experience, and they pull from the individual journal prompts to intentionally plan reflection discussions. As a whole, each ABE team is asked to collaboratively write a "This We Believe" essay which collects thoughts, ideas, questions, and a call to action around each social cause. Each team is then asked to create a joint "This We Believe" photo essay, which includes their written words, music, and photos from each experience. These photo essays are then shared publicly at a closing reflection ceremony each year.

- **Student Service Leaders:** Finally, many ECU students participated in student-led service programs affiliated with local community partners. These programs range from literacy-based pen pal activities to tutoring programs to working with local senior citizens through friendship-based relationships. Each student leader participates in an ongoing leadership development program to ensure that student participants have meaningful experiences. They are also expected to reflect on their own leadership development and the long-term sustainability of their organization. This reflection on personal and organizational leadership is organized around a framework called SOLARR -- service with a purpose, orientation and education, leadership development, awareness of social causes and advocacy for social justice, reflection with a passion, and relationships with community. The student leaders are asked to consider the many ways they can journey with student participants in their programs, and how they themselves -- as peer leaders -- should take some responsibility for the learning that happens through their programs.

Structured reflection can take many forms depending on the size and overall characteristics of a program. But the risk of having students “miss the meaning” is too great for us to not think and plan carefully about reflection opportunities. We are continually honing these reflection plans, however, and always attempting to make sure they are integrated and feasible. As a NASPA Lead institution committed to civic learning and democratic engagement, these educational efforts are critically important parts of our work at East Carolina University.

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